Brands and Video Games: Three Steps for Finding a Perfect Match

Step 1: Analyzing Attributes of Prospective Partners

Millions of people around the world play video games on a daily basis. As a result, video games present an amazing marketing opportunity. But how do you identify which game is appropriate for your brand? There is endless variety in the scope and presentation of video games—from vanquishing zombie hoards on your PC, to buying and selling real life locations on your mobile phone, to throwing a game-winning touchdown on your console. When it comes to branding and product placement, it's important to find the right game to reach your target audience and maximize the value of your investment.

This three-part article series will discuss some of the issues that brand owners and video game publishers face when pursuing marketing and promotional opportunities within games. This first article focuses on game attributes—determining what types of games are best suited for your brand. Future articles will consider user interactions with brands—analyzing how a user's relationship with the brand may affect game play and the brand's marketing success, and the effects of user-generated content on branding within video games. Combined, these articles will show you how to handle the issues you face when harnessing the enormous marketing potential of video games to promote your brand.

There are three main attributes of video games that should be considered when deciding how to market your brand: genre, platform, and setting. Genre refers to the essential format of the video game, whether it is a first-person shooter such as Halo or Call of Duty, a real-time strategy such as Starcraft, a role-playing game such as Final Fantasy, or sports game such as Madden or NBA 2K11. Platform refers to the technology used to play the game. Common platforms include consoles like the Wii, XBOX 360, or Playstation 3, personal computers, casual gaming sites like Yahoo Games or Kongregate, social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace, and mobile devices. Finally, setting refers to the environment and storyline of the video game, such as whether the game takes place in outer space, a magical forest, or Germany in the 1940s.

In order to make the most effective use of branding in video games, the product placement must make sense both for the brand owner and for the game developer. The brand placement should lead to greater sales and publicity for the brand, as well as improve the overall quality and user experience of the video game. During the course of these articles, three hypothetical brands will be used for illustration: 1) Cupquake brand cake-flavored soft drinks ("The soda that rocks your world!"); 2) Captain Victory brand sporting goods ("For the heroes on your team"); and 3) Kraken Financial Services ("Release the investor in you!").

Genre

The genre of video game you choose for your brand will depend on what type of game mechanic most naturally and effectively integrates your products. For example, a basketball game would be a natural genre choice for Captain Victory Sporting Goods, as the publisher could easily outfit players with branded equipment. On the other hand, a first-person shooter might provide fewer appropriate branding opportunities for Captain Victory since sporting equipment does not typically play a large role in first-person shooters.[1]

Cupquake or Kraken Financial, however, might thrive in a first-person shooter. A first-person perspective, while not allowing users to see their characters during game play, still allows users to view brands that are part of the game's environment. For example, by placing Cupquake products in various branded vending machines throughout a game, players could receive health bonuses by drinking Cupquake cola. Alternatively, Kraken Financial banks and ATMs could serve as save-points or could integrate into a game's storyline as a provider of funds to the main character. This type of branding as part of the game's environment is also possible with adventure and role playing games, which commonly use a third-person perspective that allows players to view more of the game's environment and surroundings.

Real time strategy games, on the other hand, are often played by looking down on a distant landscape. As a result, there may be fewer branding opportunities in that genre, as users will be unable to see much detail within the game. Certain brands might still find opportunities in this genre though, particularly if their stores or signage have a distinctive appearance that players would recognize.

Platform

In addition to the traditional console or PC-based video game, one can also find video games on mobile devices, social networking sites, or on casual gaming websites. Each platform presents unique opportunities and challenges for brand owners.

One of the most important distinctions between platforms is the demographics of their players. Consoles users represent the traditional gaming audience: predominantly males, ranging in age from 13 to 30. The PC gaming audience is similar to that of consoles, though with an even more avid player base. Extra care should be taken when introducing branding on these platforms, to avoid creating an artificial or forced feel to the game. Traditional and avid gamers generally have a heightened sensitivity to branding, and a poorly integrated brand could significantly disrupt their enjoyment and promotion of the game.

Casual games, and social games in particular, reach a much wider audience than traditional console or PC-based games. For example, Facebook boasts more than 400 million active users, allowing games on that platform to reach an incredibly broad range of users, many of whom are not traditional gamers. Due to this immense and diverse audience, social games provide a prime opportunity for brands with universal or international appeal to reach a very large audience, and may also allow smaller brands to expand their level of recognition.

One feature of casual and social games that brand owners may want to be mindful of, however, is the fact that these sites often feature additional advertising on the page near the game itself. Brand owners should realize that their products and services may share a user's attention with additional third-party marketing, which could even be competitive with their products. The risk of competing advertisements may be increased by the fact that these adjacent advertisements are often served by the platform, not the individual game, and are therefore subject to separate contractual agreements. Depending on the platform at issue, your attorney may be able to negotiate an arrangement that would minimize the risk of this competition occurring.

Mobile gaming has two distinct audiences. For smart phones and similar devices, the audience has generally consisted of tech-savvy individuals and white-collar professionals, though this audience is quickly expanding as smart phones become increasingly common. For portable gaming devices, the audience generally consists of children, young adults, and hardcore video game fans. Branding on smart phones often mirrors that of social games, due to the similarly broad audience. On the other hand, branding for portable gaming devices is more focused on the traditional gaming audience or children, depending on the game. An additional consideration for mobile branding is the reduced screen size and the inability of users to perceive small details within most games. Therefore, publishers and brand owners may need to explore creative ways to display the brand in a large enough fashion that users can recognize the brand.

Setting

Video games take place in a practically infinite number of different settings. Games are just as likely to be based in a post-apocalyptic future, the distant past, or imaginary worlds as they are to be based in the present reality. Among these myriad possibilities for a game's setting, there is a clear division when it comes to branding—games based on modern-day reality provide more opportunities for real-world branding than games based on fantasy or different time periods.

"Reality" is a relative term—it doesn't mean that the game's plot must be a true story. However, the game must have a realistic enough environment that it would make sense to have actual real-world products and services within the game. For instance, a game could feature a league of imaginary creatures like Big Foot and the Loch Ness Monster playing against real-world baseball teams. Publishers could still outfit the game characters with Captain Victory apparel and equipment to imitate a normal baseball game without affecting the essential content of the game.

However, if a video game takes place in a fantasy world within an underground cavernous wasteland, it might be disconcerting for players to encounter real-world brands within the game. Similarly, even if based on reality, but set in 1914 to mimic World War One, a video game would have a very unnatural feel if modern day brands appeared as part of game play. There may still be opportunities for brand owners within these spaces, however. In recent marketing campaigns, certain brands have tied their products to fantasy games by using combinations of real-world advertisements and in-game promotions. Likewise, historical games could still provide a rich environment for brands that have been around since that era, so long as the placement is implemented in a time-appropriate manner.

Video games provide an excellent marketing opportunity for brand owners, but making sure the brand and game are a proper fit is key. If the game doesn't effectively promote the brand, or if branding within the game creates an unnatural experience for players, then both the publisher and the brand owner could be harmed rather than helped by the product placement. Considering a game's genre, platform, and setting when entering into a product placement agreement will help to ensure that branding not only serves to effectively promote the product, but enhances the game experience as well.

Authored By:

Thayer Preece
(650) 815-2618
tpreece@sheppardmullin.com

and

Derek Lowrey
(Extern Extraordinaire)

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[1] Unless Captain Victory is keen on players using branded sporting equipment to bludgeon their enemies to death.